

HUMANISTIC CONCERNS AND SOCIAL MILIEU AS PROJECTED BY KHUSHWANT SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to examine how Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan pictures the brutal, realistic story of politic hatred, humanistic concerns and social milieu and of mass passions during the tragic days that preceded and followed the partition of India. The most important symbol in the novel in terms of descriptions of trains that reflect the changing tone of life.

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INTRODUCTION

It is universally acknowledged that Khushwant Singh is one of India's most distinguished man of letters with an international repute and honour. His achievement is many fold – a novelist, short story writer, historian, essayist, sketchiest, journalist and editor – which is very much sufficient to establish him in Indian Writing in English as a versatile genius. Till date he is said to have produced two novels, a considerable number of short stories, an authentic history of the Sikhs, biographies of Sikh leaders and many articles which reveal his thought and feeling of a great writer. "His presentation of the real and the Cosmic makes him stand as a pillar and peer among modern Indian Writers on subject of concern to contemporary man" (Singh 2). As a novelist, he is famous for *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959). *Train to Pakistan* had made him internationally known, though he had made a literary reputation with publication of his short stories *The Mark of Vishnu and other Stories* (1957).

Khuswant Singh is what his British education made him, a cultured humanist. He gladly confesses:

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"I am the product of both East and the West". The Punjab Countryside, the Urban Delhi and the sophisticated city of London are the three dominant factors that influenced Khuswant Singh. Thus exposed to the ideas and attitudes of the West. Mr. Singh is essentially an orientalist in outlook who has Indian self and individuality of personality. His journey is not without trials and tribulations, it is a Ceaseless quest for identity. His creative urge as a novelist, short story writer, historian and essayist has been the gradual achievement of self-expression and a continuous search for self-seeking. In spite of his mind and personality as a whole being moulded by Western education and culture, he is an heart a Sikh and a pure Indian. He values Indian art and culture and is deeply rooted in the soil. His writing has grown out of the grass roots of the social milieu as his experience of rural India is the base of his creative endeavour. Mr. Singh has portrayed India both as an outsider and an insider. Commenting on the fictional forte and novelist art of Mr. Singh, Antony Burgess writes:

"The most notable writer from the Punjab is undoubtedly the Sikh Khuswant Singh, whose *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is a fine chronicle of life in a Sikh community in the period 1942-43. We have here a formidable novelist who writes too little" (P 161).

A work of art does not come into existence autonomously. As W.H. Auden put it, In "Writing", "no artist can create by a simple act of will but must wait until what he believes to be a good idea for a work 'comes' to him" (P 638). An artist who is a responsible individual creates a literary piece that has inter-connections with a number of social, political and economic as well as personal factors. In the words of Vasant A. Shahana,

"Khuswant Singh's art is deeply rooted in the soil, and the vitality which it reveals is the vigour of a genuine Punjabi, permeated by an inwardly – felt Punjabi consciousness" (P 345).

Novel as a genre reached its Zenith in the Victorian Era. The novel was the dominant form in the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens with his humanistic perspective, Thackeray with his social revelation, George Meredith with his satiric trend brought in a variety to the field of novel writing in England. Novel as a literary genre made its entry into the aesthetic field in India, thanks to the Indian Renaissance. The Renaissance in modern Indian literature began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The Indian literary scene had its inauguration in Bengal. *Alabar Gharer Dulal* (1858) was perhaps the first novel. It was followed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's *Wife* (1864), Raj Lakshmi Devi's *The Hindu Wife* (1876) and Tom Dutt's *Bianca* (1878). The song 'Bande Mataram' in *Ananda Math* (1882) by B.C. Chatterjee converted the people to the religion of Patriotism.

It is no exaggeration to say that the trio – R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao – gave a freshness to the Indian English novel. Mulk Raj Anand used the novel as a platform to voice his views on social uncouthness. His *Untouchable* and *Coolies* may be cited as examples. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is more or less a propagation of Gandhian. R.K. Narayan established his creed as a novelist who combines humour with art. Writers from different regions have portrayed their native land and native consciousness. While Naini Bhaumik of Bengal and Majoo Basu and Rajnikanta Bardoloi of Assam have presented as pioneer their region in their novels, Menon Marath's *Wound of Spring* describes the traditional Nayir family in Kerala during the second decade of the 20th century. While Romesh Chunder Dutt's *The Lake of Palms* (1909) is a study of the social

life in Bengal. Balkrishna's *The Love of Kusana* is a novel on the social life in Punjab. In such a scenario of Indian fiction, Khuswant Singh as a novelist could be identified as a pioneering spirit of Sikh consciousness. Punjab and Sikh ethos form the abstract of his imagination as he "chooses only those areas and facets of life which he knows best and presents them with satire and wit" (Shahane 351).

Khuswant Singh's novels not only reveal the Indian milieu but outspokenly they bring out different facets of his Sikh ethos. The action of *Train to Pakistan* centres round a tiny village, Mano Majra on the Indo-Pakistan border. The village is dominated by Sikhs, but it has Muslim and Hindu inhabitants. Khuswant Singh does not talk about the feedback of partition on the entire country. His area is Punjab and he does out with creativity of how this village in Punjab gets affected. The novel opens with a scene of dacoity, led by Malli, who in the course of action murders Ram Lal. Juggat Singh, popularly known as 'budmash' is in love with Nooram, the daughter of a Muslim weaver. In spite of the Muslims and Sikhs being rivals from the early periods, Jugga is even prepared to lay down his life for the Muslim girl. He spends the night with her, but is arrested by the police on suspicion. The village is awakened to life when Iqbal, a western educated social worker, arrives. He is suspected to be a member of the Muslim League. He too, is arrested for Ram Lal's murder, by mistake; meanwhile the whole country is shaken by partition of India, into Hindustan and Pakistan. Mano Majra is worsely affected. The real drama begins when a train filled with corpses of Hindus and Sikhs arrives. The prevailing peace is routed. The friendship maintained by the Sikhs with the Muslims and Hindus for years is shattered.

Hukum Chand, the Magistrate releases Jugga and Iqbal to create peace. To be on the safe side, the Muslims start evacuating the village. Muslims leave all their property and March towards Pakistan. Ironically, Malli is appointed to look after their belonging Nooran, who is carrying Jugga's child receives no encouragement from Jugga's mother. She knew very well that if she goes to Pakistan, "they will kill it (the child) when they know it has a Sikh father" (TTP 114). Hukum Chand's mistress Haseena too leaves.

In the meantime, some Sikh fanatics gather near the Gurdwara and plan to blow of the train which carries Muslim refugees. In a retaliating mood, their wish is to send it as a 'Gift to Pakistan'. Meet Singh, the priest could only pray. Jugga comes to know of this evil dead. He cuts off the rope tied across the steel pan and the fanatics shoot at him. The train goes over him to Pakistan. Commenting on this final act, Sunil Alhuwalia says:

"The novel indeed transcends its melodramatic character because of its stress on the true religion of man as against relieved only at the end, by an act of self – abnegation" (P 27).

It was the time of Partition which greatly moved him. The harrowing events and turbulent days drastically changed his outlook to life. His faith in the nobility of human race was shattered:

"The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country... I became ... an angry middle – aged him, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world ... I decided to try my hand at writing".

Mano Majra, a small village in Punjab, serves at the fictional setting of *Train to Pakistan*. It is situated on the India – Pakistan border, half a mile away from the river

Sutlej. Though the frontier area has become a scene of rioting and bloodshed, life in Mano Majra remains to be peaceful. Partition does not even mean much to Mano Majra;

“No one Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan” (Train to Pakistan 22).

The train in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is at the heart of sequence of events of motivation:

“Mano Majra has always been known for its railway station. Since the bridge has only one track, the station has several sidings where less important trains can wait, to make way for the more important” (TTP 3).

Not many trains stop at Mano Majra. Express trains do not stop at all only two passenger trains running between Lahore and Delhi stop here. Whistling and puffing of engines fill the atmosphere of the village:

“All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains” (TTP 4)

Thus, it is closely linked with the village, Mano Majra. The activities of the villagers are also associated with the arrival and departure of trains. The prayers by the priest Meet Singh and Mulla Imam Baksh are offered by the passing of the trains. The Mano Majrans are at work in the fields and the kitchen regulated by the trains. They take rest by the passing of the trains. Sometimes, “life at Mano Majra is stilled, save for the dogs barking at the trains that pass in the night” (TTP 5). The train is a dual symbol. It symbolizes, on one hand, life and action but on the other hand, it stands for death and disaster. The train which comes from Pakistan side carrying countless dead bodies is shocking and horrifying. The settling and appearance of the train produce an atmosphere with awful and heartening like funeral atmosphere. Normally every train has bright head light but the train from Pakistan is without head light. Thus, it gives symbol of darkness and death.

Khushwant Singh exhibits a genuine faith in the humanistic ideal in this novel *Train to Pakistan*. He creates characters like Juggut Singh who lays down his life for the woman he loves and adores. Some novelists are contented to depict simply the sordid actualities of life, but Khushwant Singh goes deeper and deeper in ethical humanism that regulates his portraiture of the real and the actual. Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is not simply on realistic tract, it is a record of actual events, people and places. It reaffirms Mr. Singh's faith in man and his commitment to the humanistic ideal. Vasant A. Shahane remarks:

“Hukum Chand, the humanistic bureaucrat, is the preserver, whereas Iqbal Singh, the communist, is the destroyer, Juggut Singh plays a dual role of creator and destroyer. He destroys only to create again and thus symbolizes the triumph of good over evil within himself as well as the concept of renewal. His soul, like that of the phoenix, rises from its ashes only to proclaim that atleast his ‘Train to Pakistan’ is a symbol of hope and light in the cruel world of darkness and despair” (P 103).

Juggut Singh represents a significant aspect of the novelist's view of man hopelessly divided between good and evil, noble and ignoble, sacred and profane. Khushwant Singh has painted Jugga as a humanist in his final act of sacrifice, the waves of feelings and expectations in his mind. In this novel, the social milieu reveals that Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims have made the traditional structures of the Punjabi society in the Pre-Partition India. Culture, language and customs contributed a lot the larger Punjabi identity though at a certain level religion divided them into communal groupings – almost separate

identities. Mano Majra, the focal point of *Train to Pakistan* is by and large, typical of the rural Punjabi life. In view of economic and cultural backwardness. Mano Majra like any other village in the sub-continent.

Khushwant Singh is objective in his outlook. Beginning from a critical view on the Sikhs, the novelist moves on to draw out the inefficiencies of the society in general. Literature generally expresses thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life. To stand the test of time a good work of art should 'hold the mirror upto nature' and it should be original. If a writer is able to evoke his concerns with feelings and thoughts which humanity recognizes as belonging to real life, then, he passes the test of 'holding the mirror upto nature'. Khushwant Singh brings before one's attention the destruction of human values in a larger level in *Train to Pakistan*. No doubt, he is gifted with the power of evoking the feeling of compassion and pathos through realistic picturizations.

Khushwant Singh has used in *Train to Pakistan* the tiny Punjabi village of Mano Majra as a microcosm of vivisected India. The power of the novel lies in his vivid recreation of the life of the village before and after the beginning of the massacre.

To conclude, Khushwant Singh is a witness to the holocaust that followed in the wake of partition of the country. It was really the bloodiest upheavals of our history that took innocent lives and loss of property. His *Train to Pakistan* is the result of his sense of guilt that he had done nothing to save the lives of the innocent people. The internal tensions provide the novelist fruitful areas of characters and situations, particularly the ability to present a situation with down to earth wordliness to reveal the tragic in the actualities of life. In a nutshell, it may be said that *Train to Pakistan* is Khushwant Singh's master piece and most popular novel on partition theme.

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